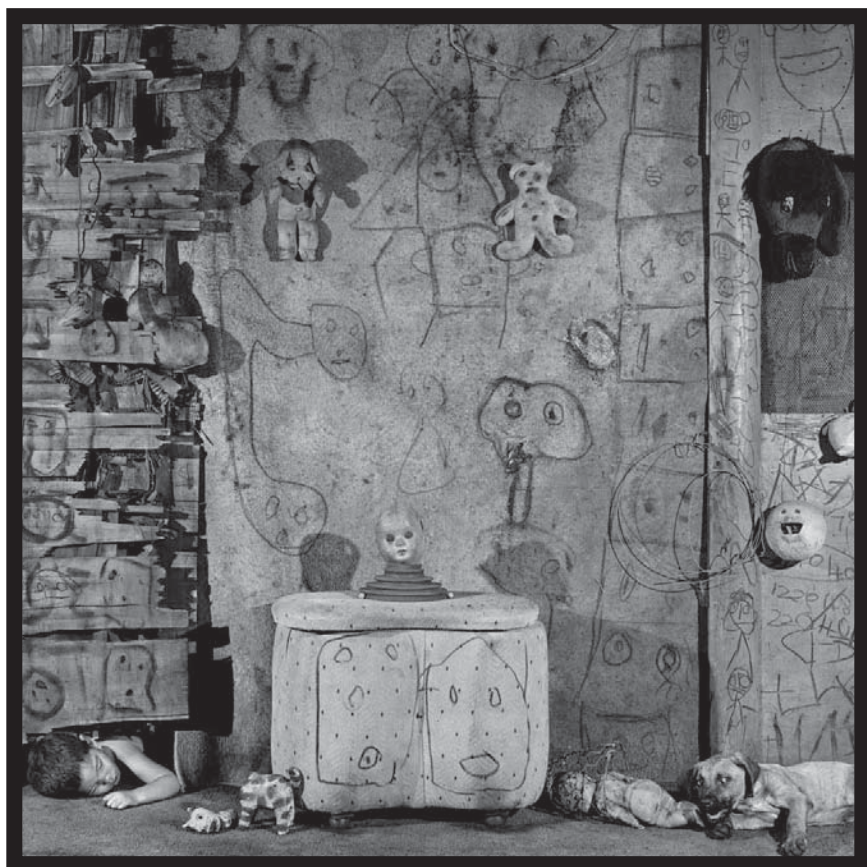


# GRAMSCI'S BLACK MARX

WHITHER THE SLAVE  
IN CIVIL SOCIETY?



FRANK WILDERSON, III

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN  
THIS COUNTRY HAS BEEN  
A PHENOMENON WITHOUT  
ANALOG.

— Eugene Genovese, 1993

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# A DECISIVE ANTAGONISM

Any serious consideration of the question of antagonistic identity formation — a formation, the mass mobilisation of which can precipitate a crisis in the institutions and assumptive logic which undergird the United States of America — must come to grips with the limitations of marxist discourse in the face of the black subject. This is because the United States is constructed at the intersection of both a capitalist and white supremacist matrix. And the privileged subject of marxist discourse is a subaltern who is approached by variable capital — a wage. In other words, marxism assumes a subaltern structured by capital, not by white supremacy. In this scenario, racism is read off the base, as it were, as being derivative of political economy. This is not an adequate subalternity from which to think the elaboration of antagonistic identity formation; not if we are truly committed to elaborating a theory of crisis — crisis at the crux of America's institutional and discursive strategies.

The scandal with which the black subject position threatens Gramscian discourse is manifest in the subject's ontological disarticulation of Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness. By examining the strategy and structure of the black subject's absence in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and by contemplating the black subject's incommensurability with the key categories of Gramscian theory, we come face to face with three unsettling consequences.

Firstly, the black American subject imposes a radical incoherence upon the assumptive logic of Gramscian discourse. In other words, s/he implies a scandal. Secondly, the black subject reveals marxism's inability to think white supremacy as the base and, in so doing, calls into question marxism's claim to elaborate a comprehensive, or in the words of Antonio Gramsci, 'decisive' antagonism. Stated another way: Gramscian marxism is able to imagine the subject which transforms her/himself into a mass of antagonistic identity formations, formations which can precipitate a crisis in wage slavery, exploitation, and/or hegemony, but it is asleep at the wheel when asked to provide enabling antagonisms toward unwaged slavery, despotism, and/or terror.

Finally, we begin to see how marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety: a desire for socialism on the other side of crisis — a society which does away not with the category of worker, but with the imposition workers suffer under the approach of variable capital: in other words, the mark of its conceptual anxiety is in its desire to democratise work and thus help keep in place, ensure the coherence

of, the Reformation and Enlightenment ‘foundational’ values of productivity and progress. This is a crowding-out scenario for other post-revolutionary possibilities, i.e. idleness.

Why interrogate Gramsci with the political predicament and desire of the black(ened) subject position in the Western Hemisphere? Because the *Prison Notebooks*’ intentionality, and general reception, lay claim to universal applicability. Neither Gramsci nor his spiritual progenitors in the form of scholars or activists say that the Gramscian project sows the seeds of freedom for whites only. Instead, they claim that deep within the organicity of the organic intellectual is the organic black intellectual, the organic Chinese intellectual, the organic South American intellectual and so on; that though there are historical and cultural variances, there is a structural consistency which elaborates all organic intellectuals and undergirds all resistance.

Through what strategies does the black subject destabilise — emerge as the unthought, and thus the scandal of — historical materialism? How does the black subject distort and expand marxist categories in ways that create, in the words of Hortense Spillers, ‘a distended organisational calculus?’ (Spillers 1996, p. 82). We could put the question another way: How does the black subject function within the American desiring machine differently than the quintessential Gramscian subaltern, the worker?

Before going more deeply into how the black subject position destabilises or disarticulates the categories foundational to the assumptive logic of marxism, it’s important to allow ourselves a digression that attempts to schematise the Gramscian project on its own terms.

and warehoused — like the cows. Again, the chief constant to the dream is that, whereas desire for black labour power is often a *historical component* to the institutionality of white supremacy, it is not a *constituent element*.

This paradox is not to be found at the crux of Gramsci's intellectual pessimism or his optimistic will. His concern is with subjects in a white(ned) enough subject position that they are confronted by, or threatened with the removal of, a wage, be it monetary or social. But black subjectivity itself disarticulates the Gramscian dream as a ubiquitous emancipatory strategy, because Gramsci (like most US social movements) has no theory of, or solidarity with, the slave. Whereas the positionality of the worker enables the reconfiguration of civil society, the positionality of the slave exists as a destabilising force within civil society because civil society gains its coherence, *the very tabula rasa upon which workers and industrialists struggle for hegemony*, through the violence of black erasure. From the coherence of civil society the black subject beckons with the incoherence of civil war. Civil war, then, becomes that unthought but never forgotten spectre waiting in the wings — the understudy of Gramsci's hegemony.

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# CONCLUSION

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Civil society is the terrain where hegemony is produced, contested, mapped. And the invitation to participate in hegemony's gestures of influence, leadership, and consent is not extended to the black subject. We live in the world, but exist outside of civil society. This structurally impossible position is a paradox because the black subject, the slave, is vital to civil society's political economy: s/he kick-starts capital at its genesis and rescues it from its over-accumulation crisis at its end — black death is its condition of possibility. Civil society's subaltern, the worker, is coded as waged, and wages are white. But marxism has no account of this phenomenal birth and life-saving role played by the black subject: in Gramsci we have consistent silence.

The black body in the US is that constant reminder that not only can work not be reformed but it cannot be transformed to accommodate all subjects: work is a white category. The fact that millions upon millions of black people work misses the point. The point is we were never meant to be workers; in other words, capital/white supremacy's dream did not envision us as being incorporated or incorporative. From the very beginning, we were meant to be accumulated and die. Work (i.e. the French shipbuilding industry and bourgeois civil society which finally extended its progressive hegemony to workers and peasants to topple the aristocracy) was what grew up all around us — 20 to 60 million seeds planted at the bottom of the Atlantic, 5 million seeds planted in Dixie. Work sometimes registers as a historical component of blackness, but where whiteness is concerned, work registers as a constituent element. And the black body must be processed through a kind of civil death for this constituent element of whiteness to gain coherence. Today, at the end of the twentieth century, we are still not meant to be workers. We are meant to be warehoused and die.

The U.S. carceral network kills ... more blacks than any other ethnic group ... [and] constitute[s] an 'outside' in U.S. political life. In fact, our society displays waves of concentric outside circles with increasing distances from bourgeois self-policing. The state routinely polices the unassimilable in the hell of lockdown, deprivation tanks, control units, and holes for political prisoners. (James, 1996, p. 34)

Work (i.e. jobs for guards in the prison industrial complex and the shot in the arm it gives to faltering white communities — its positive reterritorialisation of White Space and its simultaneous deterritorialisation of Black Space) is what grows up around our dead bodies once again. The chief difference today, compared to several hundred years ago, is that today our bodies are desired, accumulated,



# THE GRAMSCIAN DREAM

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Students of struggle return, doggedly, to the *Prison Notebooks* for insights regarding how to bring about a revolution in a society in which state/capital formations are in some way protected by the ‘trenches’ of civil society. It is this outer perimeter, this discursive ‘trench’, constructed by an ensemble of private initiatives, activities, and an ensemble of pose-able questions (hegemony), which must be reconfigured before a revolution can take the form of a frontal assault. But this trench called civil society is not, for Gramsci, in and of itself the bane of the working class. Instead it represents a terrain to be occupied, assumed, and appropriated in a pedagogic project of transforming ‘common sense’ into ‘good sense’. This notion of ‘destruction-construction’ is a War of Position which involves agitating *within* civil society in a ‘revolutionary movement’ that builds ‘qualitatively new social relationships’ (Sassoon, 1987, p. 15):

[A War of Position] is a struggle that engages on a wide range of fronts in which the state as normally defined ... is only one aspect. [For Gramsci a War of Position is the most ‘decisive’ form of engagement] because it is the form in which bourgeois power is exercised [and victory on] these fronts makes possible or conclusive a frontal attack or War of Movement. (Sassoon, 1987, pp. 15–17)

In other words, for revolution to be feasible the proletariat must be ‘hailed’, in the Althusserian sense of the word, to a revolutionary position. And, for Gramsci, it is within this ‘trench’ between the economic structure and the state (with its legislation and its coercion), within civil society, that this hailing must take place. Again, for that to happen the trench, civil society, must be transformed. A War of Position can be summed up as a process by which workers struggling against capital and the state forge organs of working class civil society which in turn elaborate organic intellectuals capable of assimilating certain traditional intellectuals, and throughout the whole process all the struggle’s personnel, if you will, fashion a discourse on all of civil society’s fronts through which they eventually become hegemonic. In this way the ‘common sense’, the ‘spontaneous’ consent of the ruled toward the ideology of the rulers, finds its ‘good sense’, fragments of antagonistic sentiment transformed into an ensemble of questions which, prior to this process, could not be posed (i.e., What is to be done?). Common sense, by way of contrast, is an effect of ‘the prevailing *forma mentis*’. It involves

the notion that the social order can be perfected through ‘fair and open’ competition ... [and it] seeks to remedy problems and injustices through

reforms fought for and negotiated among competing groups within the existing overall structure ... thus leaving the juridical-administrative apparatus of the state more or less intact ... It ... makes the revolutionary idea of eliminating competitiveness (i.e., greed) as the primary motivating force in society seem unreasonable, unrealistic, or even dangerous. (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 13)

The pedagogical implications are self-evident. For Gramsci this is a process through which various strata of the class struggling for dominance achieve 'historical self-awareness' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 333–35). And for this reason civil society *itself* is not the bane of workers because its constituent elements (as opposed to the way those elements are combined) are not anti-worker.<sup>1</sup> Therefore:

[Gramsci's] purpose is not to repress civil society or to restrict its space but rather to develop a revolutionary strategy (a 'war of position') that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that could give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern. (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 7)

At this moment (the end of subalternity by way of the destruction of the ruling class) the State becomes 'ethical'. Gramsci writes:

Every State is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes. (1971, p. 258)

He suggests that schools and courts perform this function for the State, before describing the 'so-called private initiatives and activities' which form the hegemonic apparatuses of the ruling class. But these private initiatives (i.e., newspapers, cinema, guild associations) are not 'ethical' precisely because of their ability to exist in tandem with the State and/or due to their function as its outright handmaidens (i.e., lobbyists, PACs).

[Therefore] only the social group [his code word for 'class', in an attempt to secure the *Notebooks*' safe passage past Mussolini's prison censors] that poses the end of the State and its own end as the target to be achieved can create an ethical State — i.e. one which tends to put an end to the internal

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1 The constituent elements of civil society are, however, anti-black. And it is this notion of civil society-qua-anti-black, in its *formal* dimensions – regardless of its content – that I will illustrate in this paper.

its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (1987, p. 68)

Herein, the concept of civil war takes on a comprehensive and structural, as opposed to merely eventful, connotation.

this particular historical order, black female and black male are absolutely equal. (Spillers, 1984 p. 77)

In the socio-political order of the New World the black body is a 'captive body' marked and branded from one generation to the next. A body on which

any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions [is lost]. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate *a total objectification*, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory. (emphasis mine, p. 68)

The gratuitous violence *begun* in slavery, hand in hand with the absence of data for the New World Historical Axis (Rights/Entitlement, Sovereignty, Immigration) *as a result of* slavery, position black subjects in excess of Gramsci's fundamental categories, i.e. labour, exploitation, historical self-awareness; for these processes of subjectification are assumed by those with a semiotics of analogy already in hand — the currency of exchange through which 'a dimension ... of relatedness between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions' can be established. Thus, the black subject imposes a radical incoherence upon the assumptive logic of Gramscian discourse. S/he implies a scandal: 'total objectification' in contradistinction to human possibility, however slim, as in the case of working class hegemony, that human possibility appears.

It is this scandal which places black subjectivity in a structurally impossible position, outside of the 'natural' articulations of hegemony; but it also places hegemony in a structurally impossible position because our presence works back upon the grammar of hegemony and threatens it with incoherence. If every subject — even the most massacred subjects, Indians — are required to have analogues within the nation's structuring narrative, and one very large significant subject, the subject upon which the nation's drama of value is built, is a subject whose experience is without analogue then, by that subject's very presence all other analogues are destabilised. Lest we think of the black body as captive only until the mid-nineteenth century, Spillers reminds us that the marking and branding, the total objectification are as much a part of the present as they were of the past.

Even though the captive flesh/body has been 'liberated', and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and

divisions of the ruled ... and to create a technically and morally unitary social organism. (p. 259)

In other words, 'civil society can only be the site of universal freedom when it extends to the point of becoming the state, that is, when the need for political society is obviated' (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 30).

'[T]he phenomenon of 'subordination' ... occurs without coercion; it is an instance of power that is exercised and extended in civil society, resulting in the hegemony of one class over others who, for their part, acquiesce to it willingly or, as Gramsci puts it, 'spontaneously'. (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 22)

What appears to be spontaneous is a product of consent manufactured by intellectuals of the ruling class. Again, not only is consent manufactured but it is backed up by coercion-in-reserve, what Gramsci calls political society: the courts, the army, the police, and, for the past 57 years, the atomic bomb.

It is true that Gramsci acknowledges no organic division between political society and civil society. He makes the division for methodological purposes. There is one organism, 'the modern bourgeois-liberal state' (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 28), but there are two qualitatively different kinds of apparatuses: on the one hand, the ensemble of so-called private associations and ideological invitations to participate in a wide and varied play of consensus-making strategies (civil society), and on the other hand, a set of enforcement structures which kick in when that ensemble is regressive or can no longer lead (political society). But Gramsci would have us believe not that *white* positionality emerges and is elaborated on the terrain of civil society and encounters coercion when civil society is not expansive enough to embrace the idea of freedom for all, but that *all* positionalities emerge and are elaborated on the terrain of civil society. Gramsci does not racialise this birth, elaboration, and stunting, or re-emergence, of human subjectivity — because civil society, supposedly, elaborates all subjectivity and so there is no need for such specificity.

Anglo-American Gramscians, like Buttigieg and Sassoon, and US activists in the anti-globalisation movement whose unspoken grammar is predicated on Gramsci's assumptive logic, continue this tradition of unraced positionality which allows them to posit the valency of Wars of Position for blacks and whites alike. They assume that all subjects are positioned in such a way as to have their consent solicited and to be able to extend their consent 'spontaneously'. This is profoundly problematic if only — leaving revolution aside for the moment — at the level of analysis; for it assumes that hegemony with its three constituent elements (influence, leadership, consent) is the modality which must be either inculcated or breached, if one is to either avoid or incur, respectively, the violence of the state. However, one of the primary claims of this essay is that, whereas

the consent of black people may seem to be called upon, its withdrawal does not precipitate a 'crisis in authority'. Put another way, the transformation of black people's acquiescent 'common sense' into revolutionary 'good sense' is an extenuating circumstance, but not the catalyst, of State violence against black people. State violence against the black body, as Martinot and Sexton suggest in their introduction, is not contingent, it is structural and, above all, gratuitous.

Therefore, Gramscian wisdom cannot imagine the emergence, elaboration, and stunting of a subject by way, *not of the contingency of violence resulting in a 'crisis of authority'*, but by way of direct relations of force. This is remarkable, and unfortunate, given the fact that the emergence of the slave, the subject-effect of an ensemble of direct relations of force, marks the emergence of capitalism *itself*. Let us put a finer point on it: violence towards the black body is the precondition for the existence of Gramsci's single entity 'the modern bourgeois-state' with its divided apparatus, political society and civil society. This is to say violence against black people is ontological and gratuitous as opposed to merely ideological and contingent.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, no magical moment (i.e., 1865) transformed paradigmatically the black body's relation to this entity.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the hegemonic advances within civil society by the Left hold out no more possibility for black life than the coercive backlash of political society. What many political theorists have either missed or ignored is that a crisis of authority that might take place by way of a Left expansion of civil society, further instantiates, rather than dismantles, the authority of whiteness. Black death is the modern bourgeois-state's recreational pastime, but the hunting season is not confined to the time (and place) of political society; blacks are fair game as a result of a progressively expanding civil society as well.

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2 The most ridiculous question a black person can ask a cop is, 'why did you shoot me?' How does one account for the gratuitous? The cop is at a disadvantage: 'I shot you because you are black; you are black because I shot you.' Here is the tautology at the heart of the colonial experience. The inverse of which Fanon has already depicted: 'In the colonies ... [the] cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich' (1968, p. 40).

3 See Marriott's *On Black Men* and the last few chapters of Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* for an analysis of how the idiom of power, irrational despotism, which blacks lived under in the nineteenth century, changed its method of conveyance after Jubilee, while maintaining gratuitous irrationality through the twentieth century.

groups presumed to possess the same kind of historical currency: sovereignty. The code of sovereignty can have both a past and future history, if you'll excuse the oxymoron, when one considers that there are 150 Native American tribes with applications in at the B.I.A. for federal recognition, that they might qualify for funds harvested from land stolen from them.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the curse of being able to generate categories for the record manifests itself in Indians' 'ability' to be named by white supremacy that they might receive a small cash advance on funds (land) which white people stole from them. (3) Immigration: another code which maps the subject onto the American Historical Axis — narratives of arrival based on collective volition and premeditated desire. Chicano/a subject positions can fortify and extend the interlocutory life of America as an idea because racial conflict can be articulated across the various contestations over the legitimacy of arrival, immigration, or of sovereignty, i.e., the Mexican-American War. In this way, whites and Chicano/as both generate data for this category.

Slavery is the great leveller of the black subject's positionality. The black American subject does not generate historical categories of Entitlement, Sovereignty, and/or Immigration for the record. *We are off the record.* To the data generating demands of the historical axis we present a virtual blank, much like the KhoiSan's virtual blank presented to the data generating demands of the anthropological axis. The work of Hortense Spillers on black female sexuality corroborates these findings. Spillers' conclusions regarding the black female subject and the discourse of sexuality are in tandem with ours regarding the black ungendered subject and the question of hegemony and, in addition, unveil the ontological elements which black women and men share: a scandal in the face of New World hegemony.

[T]he black female [is] *the veritable nemesis of degree and difference* [emphasis mine]. Having encountered what they understand as chaos, the empowered need not name further, since chaos is sufficient naming within itself. I am not addressing the black female in her historical apprenticeship as inferior being, but, rather, *the paradox of non-being* [emphasis mine]. Under the sign of

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5        What's being asserted here is that white supremacy transmogrifies codes internal to Native American culture for its own purposes. However, unlike immigrants and white women, the Native American has no purchase as a junior partner in civil society. Space does not allow for us to fully discuss this here. But Churchill and others explain how – unlike civil society's junior partners – genocide of the Indian, just like the enslavement of blacks, is a precondition for the idea of America: a condition of possibility upon which the idea of immigration can be narrativised. No web of analogy can be spun between, on the one hand, the phenomenon of genocide and slavery and, on the other hand, the phenomenon of access to institutionality and immigration. So, though white supremacy appropriates Native American codes of sovereignty, it cannot solve the contradiction that, unlike the codes civil society's junior partners, Native American codes of sovereignty are not dialogic with New World codes of immigration and access. It should also be noted that prior to the late eighteenth century and early to mid-nineteenth century the notion of Native America as sovereign nations was subordinated to the idea of the 'savage'. In short, articulation comes, conveniently, into play as the 'Indian Wars' are being won.

that can be investigated, identified, and named by the discourse: without this the discourse literally can't function. The discourse is reinvigorated by the momentary tension which ensues when an unknown entity presents itself, but this tension becomes a crisis, a scandal, when the entity remains unknown. Something unspeakable occurs. Not to possess a particular code along the anthropological axis or along the historical axis is akin to not having a gene for brown hair or green eyes on an X or Y chromosome. But not possessing a historical or anthropological axis altogether is akin to not having the chromosome itself. The first predicament throws the notion of what kind of human into play. The second predicament throws the notion of humanity itself into crisis.

Whereas even the Xhosa presented the Discourse of the Cape with both an anthropological and historical play of difference, the KhoiSan presented the Discourse of the Cape with an anthropological void.

Without those textual categories of Dress, Diet, Medicine, Crafts, Physical Appearance, and most importantly, Work, the KhoiSan stood in refusal of the invitation to become Anthropological Man. S/he was the void in Discourse which could only be designated as 'idleness'. And idleness had been (a) counterposed to work and (b) criminalised and designated with the status of sin, long before the Europeans reached the Cape: it was not a signifier within anthropology but the death knell of humanity and spirituality itself.

Thus, the KhoiSan's status within Discourse was not the status of an opponent or an interlocutor, but was the status of an unspeakable scandal. His/her position within the Discourse was one of disarticulation, for he/she did little or nothing to fortify and extend the interlocutory life of the Discourse. Just as the KhoiSan presented the Discourse of the Cape with an anthropological scandal, so the black subject in the United States, the slave, presents both marxism and American social movement practice with a historical scandal. Every group provides American discourse with acceptable categories for the record (a play of signifiers, points of articulation) except black Americans. How is black incoherence in the face of the Historical Axis germane to the black experience as 'a phenomenon without analog'?

A sample list of codes mapped out by an American subject's Historical Axis include the following. (1) Rights or Entitlements: here even Native Americans provide categories for the record when one thinks of how the Iroquois constitution, for example, becomes the American constitution. (2) Sovereignty: whether that state be one the subject left behind, or one, once again as in the case of American Indians, which was taken by force and dint of broken treaties. White supremacy has made good use of the Indian subject's positionality: a positionality which fortifies and extends the interlocutory life of America as a coherent (albeit genocidal) idea, because treaties are forms of articulation, discussions brokered between two



# CIVIL DEATH IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent. This phenomenon is central to neither Gramsci nor Marx. The theoretical importance of emphasising this in the early twenty-first century is two-fold: first, ‘the socio-political order of the New World’ (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) was kick-started by approaching a particular body (a black body) with direct relations of force, not by approaching a white body with variable capital. Thus, one could say that slavery — the ‘accumulation’ of black bodies regardless of their utility as labourers (Hartman; Johnson) through an idiom of despotic power (Patterson) — is closer to capital’s primal desire than is waged oppression — the ‘exploitation’ of unraced bodies (Marx, Lenin, Gramsci) that labour through an idiom of rational/symbolic (the wage) power: A relation of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, today, late capital is imposing a renaissance of this original desire, direct relations of force (the prison industrial complex), the despotism of the unwaged relation: and this Renaissance of slavery has, once again, as its structuring image in libidinal economy, and its primary target in political economy, the black body.

The value of reintroducing the unthought category of the slave, by way of noting the absence of the black subject, lies in the black subject’s potential for extending the demand placed on state/capital formations because its re-introduction into the discourse expands the intensity of the antagonism. In other words, the slave makes a demand, which is in excess of the demand made by the worker. The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic (Gramsci’s new hegemony, Lenin’s dictatorship of the proletariat), the slave, on the other hand, demands that production stop; stop without recourse to its ultimate democratisation. Work is not an organic principle for the slave. The absence of black subjectivity from the crux of marxist discourse is symptomatic of the discourse’s inability to cope with the possibility that the generative subject of capitalism, the black body of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the generative subject that resolves late-capital’s over-accumulation crisis, the black (incarcerated) body of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, do not reify the basic categories which structure marxist conflict: the categories of work, production, exploitation, historical self-awareness and, above all, hegemony.

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4 It’s important to bear in mind that for Hartman, Johnson, Patterson, and Spillers the libidinal economy of slavery is more fundamental to its institutionality than is the political economy. In other words, the constituent element of slavery involves desire and the accumulation of black bodies and the fact that they existed as things ‘becoming *being for* the captor’ (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). The fact that black slaves laboured is a historical variable, seemingly constant, but not a constituent element.

If, by way of the black subject, we consider the underlying grammar of the question ‘What does it mean to be free?’ that grammar being the question ‘What does it mean to suffer?’ then we come up against a grammar of suffering not only in excess of any semiotics of exploitation, but a grammar of suffering beyond signification itself, a suffering that cannot be spoken because the gratuitous terror of white supremacy is as much contingent upon the irrationality of white fantasies and shared pleasures as it is upon a logic — the logic of capital. It extends beyond textualisation. When talking about this terror, Cornel West uses the term ‘black invisibility and namelessness’ to designate, at the level of ontology, what we are calling a scandal at the level of discourse. He writes:

[America’s] unrelenting assault on black humanity produced the fundamental condition of black culture — that of black invisibility and namelessness. On the crucial existential level relating to black invisibility and namelessness, the first difficult challenge and demanding discipline is to ward off madness and discredit suicide as a desirable option. A central preoccupation of black culture is that of confronting candidly the ontological wounds, psychic scars, and existential bruises of black people while fending off insanity and self-annihilation. This is why the ‘ur-text’ of black culture is neither a word nor a book, not an architectural monument or a legal brief. Instead, it is a guttural cry and a wrenching moan — a cry not so much for help as for home, a moan less out of complaint than for recognition. (1996, pp. 80–81).

Thus, the black subject position in America is an antagonism, a demand that can not be satisfied through a transfer of ownership/organisation of existing rubrics; whereas the Gramscian subject, the worker, represents a demand that can indeed be satisfied by way of a successful War of Position, which brings about the end of exploitation. The worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices, the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity itself. From the positionality of the worker the question, ‘What does it mean to be free?’ is raised. But the question hides the process by which the discourse assumes a hidden grammar which has already posed and answered the question, ‘What does it mean to suffer?’ And that grammar is organised around the categories of exploitation (unfair labour relations or wage slavery). Thus, exploitation (wage slavery) is the only category of oppression which concerns Gramsci: society, Western society, thrives on the exploitation of the Gramscian subject. Full stop. Again, this is inadequate, because it would call white supremacy ‘racism’ and articulate it as a derivative phenomenon of the capitalist matrix, rather than incorporating white supremacy as a matrix constituent to the base, if not the base itself.

What I am saying is that the insatiability of the slave demand upon existing structures means that it cannot find its articulation within the modality of hegemony (influence, leadership, consent) — the black body cannot give its consent because ‘generalised trust’, the precondition for the solicitation of

# NO DATA FOR THE CATEGORIES

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What does it mean to be positioned not as a positive term in a counterhegemonic struggle, i.e. as a worker, but to be positioned in excess of hegemony, to be a catalyst which disarticulates the very rubric of hegemony, to be a scandal to its assumptive, foundational logic, to threaten its discursive integrity? Why is American civil life, whether regressive or expansive, predicated on black death? Why are black folk the indispensable sacrificial lamb vital to its sustenance?

In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, J.M. Coetzee examines the positionality of the KhoiSan in what he calls the early Discourse of the Cape: travel, ethnographic and scholarly writing of Europeans between the late sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Those Europeans who encountered the KhoiSan during this period came face to face with an Anthropological scandal: a being without (recognisable) customs, religion, medicine, dietary patterns, culinary habits, sexual mores, means of agriculture, and most significantly, without character — without character because, according to the literature, they did not work. Even when press-ganged into service by the whip, by the bible, by the spectre of starvation, they showed no valuation of industry. The only remedy for this condition, according to one Cape writer, was terror — their annihilation.

Wherever the European went in South Africa the project of colonisation was sutured, brokered, and fought with the help of discourse, and therefore, no matter how bloody it became, no matter how much force it necessitated, the project did not face the threat of incoherence. Africans like the Xhosa who were agriculturalists provided European discourse with enough anthropological categories for the record so that, through various strategies of articulation, they could be known by the textual project which was the accompaniment to the colonial project. But not the KhoiSan. S/he did not produce the necessary categories for the record, the play of signifiers that would allow for a sustainable semiotics.

According to Coetzee, European discourse has two structuring axes upon which its coherence depends: the Historical Axis, codes distributed along the axis of temporality and events; and the Anthropological Axis, an axis of cultural codes. It mattered very little which codes on either axis a particular indigenous community was perceived to possess — and possession is the operative word here for these codes act as a kind of currency — what matters is that the community has some play of difference along both axes; enough differences to construct taxonomies

The struggle against the domination of the few over the many, if it is to be successful, must be rooted in a careful formulation of a counterhegemonic conception of the social order, in the dissemination of such a conception, and in the formation of counterhegemonic institutions — which can only take place in civil society and actually require *an expansion of civil society*. [emphasis mine] (1995, p. 31)

... a chill runs down our spine. For this *required* expansion requires the intensification and proliferation of civil society's constituent element: black accumulation and death.

consent, 'equals racialised whiteness' (Barrett). Furthermore, as Patterson points out, slavery is natal alienation by way of social death, which is to say that a slave has no symbolic currency or material labour power to exchange: a slave does not enter into a transaction of value (however asymmetrical) but is subsumed by direct relations of force, which is to say that a slave is an articulation of a despotic irrationality whereas the worker is an articulation of a symbolic rationality. White supremacy's despotic irrationality is as foundational to American institutionality as capitalism's symbolic rationality because, as West writes, it

dictates the limits of the operation of American democracy — with black folk the indispensable sacrificial lamb vital to its sustenance. Hence black subordination constitutes the necessary condition for the flourishing of American democracy, the tragic prerequisite for America itself. This is, in part, what Richard Wright meant when he noted, 'The Negro is America's metaphor'. (1996, p. 72)

And it is well known that a metaphor comes into being through a violence that kills, rather than merely exploits, the object so that the concept might live. West's interventions help us see how marxism can only come to grips with America's structuring rationality — what it calls capitalism, or political economy; but cannot come to grips with America's structuring irrationality: the libidinal economy of white supremacy, and its hyper-discursive violence that kills the black subject so that the concept, civil society, may live. In other words, from the incoherence of black death, America generates the coherence of white life. This is important when considering the Gramscian paradigm (and its progenitors in the world of US social movements today) which is so dependent on the empirical status of hegemony and civil society: struggles over hegemony are seldom, if ever, asignifying — at some point they require coherence, they require categories for the record — which means they contain the seeds of anti-blackness.

Let us illustrate this by way of a hypothetical scenario. In the early part of the twentieth century, civil society in Chicago grew up, if you will, around emerging industries such as meat packing. In his notes on 'Americanism and Fordism' (1971, pp. 280–314), Gramsci explores the 'scientific management' of Taylorism, the prohibition on alcohol, and Fordist interventions into the working class family, which formed the ideological, value-laden grid of civil society in places like turn of the century Chicago:

It is worth drawing attention to the way in which industrialists (Ford in particular) have been concerned with the sexual affairs of their employees and with their family arrangements in general. One should not be misled, any more than in the case of prohibition, by the 'puritanical' appearance assumed by this concern. The truth is that the new type of man demanded by the rationalisation of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual

instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalised. (1971, pp. 296–97)

The discourse of this ‘suitable’ regulation and rationalisation underwrote the ‘common sense’ which hailed the proletariat through the influence, leadership, and ‘spontaneous’ consent of an ensemble of questions (hegemony) and simultaneously crowded out the project of transforming proletarian shards and fragments of ‘good sense’ into a revolutionary project. Gramsci called it a ‘psycho-physical adaptation to the new industrial structure [pre-Crash], aimed for through high wages’ (p. 286). And it meant that the working class struggle was pre-hegemony, existing, he suggested, ‘still in defense of craft rights against ‘industrial liberty’’. In this scenario a war of position has yet to commence because even unions, the vanguard of the working class, were simply ‘the corporate expression of the rights of qualified crafts and therefore the industrialists’ attempts to curb them [had] a certain ‘progressive’ aspect’.

Gramsci’s preceding diagnosis is indicative of his well known pessimism of the intellect but it also contains the glimmer of his optimism of the will. For the unflinching nature of his analysis illustrates the moves that the worker must make (against Americanism and Fordism) in order to bring about the ‘flowering of the ‘superstructure’ ’ (a War of Position) so that ‘the fundamental question of hegemony [can be] posed’. But we must ask ourselves, for whom does his analysis provide an optimism of the will? Most American political theorists and social movement activists have not pried open even the crevice of a doubt about the Gramscian Dream’s applicability to all US positions, which Gramsci *himself* acknowledges when he writes:

The absence of the European historical phase, marked even in the economic field by the French Revolution, has left American popular masses in a backward state. To this should be added the absence of national homogeneity, the mixture of race-cultures, *the negro question* (emphasis mine, pp. 286–87)

For the sake our scenario — the impact of a successful War of Position on our hypothetical meat packing plant — let us not refer to the question as ‘the negro question’. Instead, let us call it the ‘cow question’. Let us suppose that the superstructure has finally ‘flowered’, and that throughout the various fronts where the power to pose the question held by the private initiatives and associations elaborated by the industrialists, hegemony has now been called into question and a war of position has been transposed into a war of maneuver. The scandal with which the black subject position threatens Gramscian discourse is manifest in the subject’s ontological disarticulation of Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness. Gramsci’s notes on ‘Americanism and Fordism’ demonstrate his acumen in expressing how the drama of value is played out in civil society (i.e. the family) *away* from the slaughter

house, while being imbricated and foundational to the class exploitation which workers experience *within* the slaughter house. But still we must ask, what about the cows? The cows are not being exploited, they are being accumulated and, if need be, killed.

The desiring machine of capital and white supremacy manifest in society two dreams, imbricated but, I would argue, distinct: the dream of worker exploitation and the dream of black accumulation and death. Nowhere in Gramsci can one find sufficient reassurance that, once the dream of worker exploitation has been smashed — once the superstructure, civil society, has ‘flowered’ and the question of hegemony has been posed — the dream of black accumulation and death will be thrown into crisis as well.

I submit that death of the black body is (a) foundational to the life of American civil society (just as foundational as it is to the drama of value — wage slavery), and (b) foundational to the fantasy space of desires which underwrite the industrialist’s hegemony *and* which underwrite the worker’s potential for, and realisation of, what Gramsci calls ‘good sense’. Thus, a whole set of new and difficult, perhaps un-Gramscian, questions emerge at the site of our meat packing plant in the throes of its War of Manoeuvre. First, how would the cows fare under a dictatorship of the proletariat? Would cows experience freedom at the mere knowledge that they’re no longer being slaughtered in an economy of exchange predicated on exploitation? In other words, would it feel more like freedom to be slaughtered by a workers’ collective where there was no exploitation, where the working day was not a minute longer than the time it took to reproduce workers’ needs and pleasures, as opposed to being slaughtered in the exploitative context of that dreary old nine to five? Secondly, in the river of common sense does the flotsam of good sense have a message in a bottle that reads ‘Workers of the World Become Vegetarians!’? Finally, is it enough to just stop eating meat? In other words, can the Gramscian worker simply *give* the cows their freedom, grant them emancipation, and have it be meaningful to the cows? The cows need some answers before they raise a hoof for the ‘flowering of the superstructure’.

The cows bring us face to face with the limitations of a Gramscian formulation of the question, what does it mean to be free? by revealing the limitations of the ways in which it formulates the question, what does it mean to suffer? Because *exploitation* (rather than accumulation and death) is at the heart of the Gramscian question, what does it mean to suffer? — and thus crowds out analysis of civil society’s foundation of despotic terror and white pleasure by way of the accumulation of black bodies — the Gramscian question also functions as a crowding out scenario of the black subject herself/himself, and is indexical of a latent anti-blackness which black folks experience in the most ‘sincere’ of social movements. So, when Buttigieg tells us that:

THE MOST RIDICULOUS QUESTION  
A BLACK PERSON CAN ASK A COP IS,  
'WHY DID YOU SHOOT ME?'  
HOW DOES ONE ACCOUNT  
FOR THE GRATUITOUS?  
THE COP IS AT A DISADVANTAGE:  
**'I SHOT YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE BLACK;  
YOU ARE BLACK BECAUSE I SHOT YOU.'**  
HERE IS THE TAUTOLOGY  
AT THE HEART OF  
THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE.